

Italia Viva, Party System Reform Morta

Carlo Fusaro

2019-09-22T21:29:05

On 17 September 2019, Matteo Renzi, the former Prime minister and former leader of the Democratic Party (PD), has announced that he was quitting the party in order to establish a new one, with 26 deputies and 15 senators following him. The party has been christened *Italia Viva* (*Lively Italy* or *Lebendig Italien*), a name meant to imply an optimistic and voluntaristic approach to the future: economic growth rather than re-distribution, investments on education, family and innovation are supposed to be at the core of its program which should be presented, discussed and fine-tuned on 18 and 19 October in Florence when Renzi will gather his tenth *Leopolda Meeting* (from the name of the oldest railway station built in the Tuscan capital at the time when it still was under the rule of Grand Duke Leopold II of the House of Lorraine: the old compound has become a no-frills fair ground, and here the former Mayor of Florence has gathered his supporters every year since 2010). Symbolic attention to gender issues will be granted by nominating a woman and a man for each party leadership role. The move may certify both the end of the PD as it was meant to be as well as the end of a party system cycle started over 25 year ago.

A struggle for stability

Italy has been struggling with governance issues for decades. After WWII it has been known for the short duration of its cabinets (less than a year in average from 1948 through 1994; around 19 months thereafter), although until the electoral reform of 1993 every single cabinet had been supported by coalitions dominated by the Christian Democratic party and the Communist party, the largest in the West and considered unsuited to govern by all other parties, as a powerful opposition. Prompted by a series of popular initiatives as a reaction to ineffective governance and corruption as well by the end of the Cold War in Europe, a strategy was pursued to transform the Italian parliamentary system based on strictly proportional electoral laws into a system which would still be parliamentary but somehow resembling Westminster based on a new mostly majority voting system (Laws 276 and 277/1993).

Three elections were held according to those laws, in 1994, 1996 and 2001. This new arrangement had been successful, but in 2005 the center-right cabinet led by Silvio Berlusconi changed the electoral law for strictly partisan reasons. The new law (law 270/2005) was an original combination of proportional and majority rules: parliamentary seats were allotted proportionally but the party or the coalition of parties with more votes (even a single one) would get a majority in the Chamber. For the Senate seats were allotted along the same rules but on a regional basis. This folly made it very likely to have opposing political outcomes of the elections in the two Chambers (which happened in 2006 and in 2013). The issue of governance was so widely acknowledged that president Giorgio Napolitano upon his re-election in 2013 passionately called on Parliament to pass the needed constitutional and

electoral reforms. In 2014, the newly nominated prime minister Matteo Renzi committed his cabinet to comply after striking a deal with the opposition still led by Berlusconi. The idea was to streamline Italy's political institutions and also pass an electoral law which would allow parliamentary elections to have a decisive outcome (most of the times). The so-called Italian transition was expected to come to an end after over 20 years (1993-2016).

What was not taken into account was that in the meantime a new anti-establishment party had entered the scene. The Five Star Movement (M5S) obtained sufficient votes to wedge itself into the party system transforming it from bipolar into tripolar. This major change and some tactical mistakes made by Renzi (primarily his inability to keep Berlusconi's support for the reforms) led to the rejection of both the electoral and the constitutional reform, putting an end to the shift towards a majoritarian democracy and revamping proportional representation, parties fragmentation and coalitions' based governance. Some decisions by the Constitutional Court significantly contributed to that outcome (dec. 1/2014 and dec. 35/2017). As a result Parliament passed the fourth electoral law in 23 years (law 165/2017) which resembles the 1993 laws, but 2/3 of the seats are strictly proportional (with a 3% threshold). Since 2018, cabinets have been formed in disregard of the outcome of the elections, solely based on after-vote party negotiations.

The dawn of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party has been established in 2007 by a coalition of former Christian Democrats, former communists, former socialists, former republicans plus a significant number of uncommitted but engaged voters. Its political and institutional strategy was to create a party which would go beyond the old parties, which would be progressive but without ideological allegiances to the past (therefore democratic without further adjectives). The PD painted itself as a party with the ambition to lead the country on the base of its platform, avoiding the painstaking and mostly ineffective multiparty coalitions. The way to accomplish that would be constitutional and electoral changes which would consolidate a bipolar political system.

This project never entirely worked out: although supported by voters, it was never accepted by large part of middle ranks of the party officials still primarily divided between the former catholics and former communists. The first leader of the PD, Walter Veltroni, had soon to resign; followed by a former communist, Pier Luigi Bersani, who watered down the initial project. The 2013 elections proved ruinous for his leadership: he conquered the majority of seats in the Chamber but not in the Senate and was unable to form a cabinet. He resigned, and the mayor of Florence of the time, Matteo Renzi, won by a landslide the election to lead the PD.

His was a reformist platform with the mildly populist aim to get rid of the entire old party ruling class. Consequently he became Prime Minister in February 2014: in spite of the achievements of his cabinet Mr Renzi was never able to obtain the full allegiance of a significant part of his own party's deputies and senators. A significant number of MPs opposed some of his flagship policies as well as the electoral and constitutional reforms. Later some of the leftist members of the party abandoned it

to form a small splinter party called Free and Equal (Leu). The internal opposition contributed greatly to Renzi's defeat in the referendum on the constitutional reform which Parliament had passed.

This outcome meant the rejection of the 25 years old strategy to change Italy's political institutions and paved the way to a return to a system similar to the one which the country had seen from 1948 to 1993. Renzi was able to be reelected as leader once again, but he never got full control of the party and had to resign after the defeat in the 2018 elections. His successor Nicola Zingaretti was supported by a coalition of middle-ranking party officials averse to reforms and oriented towards more traditional socialdemocratic policies. Later Zingaretti appointed some of the staunchest opponents of Renzi's major policies as heads of the departments of constitutional reforms and of labor. These developments might well be the end of any ambition of the PD to be more than just another decaying socialdemocratic party. In fact, it has been announced that the party will drop primaries as a way to select its leader.

Political consequences

According to the Standing Orders of the Chamber, any group of at least 20 members can form a new parliamentary group at any time. In the Senate the rules are more strict because only a party which has been present at the previous elections may form a group. Renzi's Italia Viva will have at least 25 deputies, and a deal with the leader of a tiny socialist party allows it to form an autonomous group in the Senate as well (Psi-Italia Viva). According to the Standing Orders each group is entitled a presence in each of the fourteen permanent committees. Since the groups are represented proportionally. In the Italian Parliament this means a limited but not insignificant disproportion in favor of the small groups. Furthermore the two whips of Italia Viva and Psi-Italia Viva will be also members of the Whips Conferences which assist the Chairs and basically run the agenda (which unlike in many other Parliaments is not directly controlled by the Cabinet). Italia Viva will also have a share of the financial and logistical resources which are allotted to Parliamentary groups as well as its share in the political television programmes under law 28/2000.

Renzi has been the one who prompted PD to make a totally unexpected alliance with the M5S with sole purpose to keep the far-right populist party Lega, conceived as dangerous for democracy and the role of Italy in the European Union, away from government. Coherently Renzi is committed to keep supporting the Conte II cabinet for the entire legislative term (in theory until 2023). For the first time a cabinet sees one of its main supporting parties splitting *without* losing its parliamentary support. To the contrary, Italia Viva has already enlisted a senator quitting Berlusconi's parliamentary group: if others follow, this might even increase the government's majority. It is also true, however, that Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (as well as M5S, Pd and Leu) will have to deal with a new partner who will be keen to gain visibility.

This could make things more difficult at least on minor but popular issues. Furthermore, Italia Viva will certainly push for policies not in line with the leftist twist of the M5S-Pd programme. It should not be impossible to accommodate this unexpected change but it is evident that it will take more patience and determination, while the occasions for internal conflict will increase. Two Ministers and one Undersecretary quit PD and joined Italia Viva whose leader within the cabinet will be Teresa Bellanova, the popular Minister of Agriculture, a former trade unions leader and a staunch reformist. Last but not least, there are now three autonomous political entities with the power to trigger a cabinet crisis: unless Conte proves capable to attract at least a dozen new senators from the opposition, Italia Viva, just like M5S and PD, will be able to force him to resign and could use it to extort political favors from him.

Consequences on the party system

The most significant short-term effect of the birth of Italia Viva is that it weakens the PD. The party loses about one fourth of its presence in each chamber (from 111 to 85 in the Chamber and from 50 to 37 in the Senate). In perspective most parties aside from Salvini's League and its close ally Fratelli d'Italia may pay some price to the presence of a new party placed slightly to the left of the center: primarily, again the PD where the minority even after the split is formed by personalities who have been close associates of Mr Renzi, mostly sharing his policies and able to inflict a fatal blow to the party in case Zingaretti intends to close a more strict and strategic alliance with the M5S. But also Berlusconi's Forza Italia will be affected. Among its 99 members in the Chamber and 61 in the Senate there are many MPs who dislike the alliance between their ageing leader and an ever more radical Lega leader Matteo Salvini. Finally, even the M5S whose parliamentary personnel would according to the polls lose badly in case of early elections, may lose a few members to the new party. In the long term, Renzi's Italia Viva might play a crucial role in any coalition conceived as alternative to the populist right, taking advantage of the difficulty of both PD and M5S to come to terms with each other. And it should be stressed: with whichever electoral system will be then be in force.

Until a decade ago or even less, Italian politics appeared a matter of its own political idiosyncrasies and was dismissed as a peculiar case which is cause more for an amused smile but serious political analysis. This is not the case anymore. The sad truth is that parliamentary regimes based on a functioning majority in Parliament do not seem to be able to deliver sufficiently stable and effective governments these days. Everywhere more and more fragmented societies are reflected by more and more fragmented party systems; under the influence of social media the art of striking compromises among diverse interests and strategies has become more and more difficult if not impossible exercise. In other words: the task to reconcile diversity producing a relatively unitary political project based on shared solutions has become a nightmare. Examples abound: Belgium holds the record for lengthy negotiations to form a majority after each election, Spain is recurring to elections every two years or less, Israel is split like an apple, the UK after Brexit has become a worrisome joke; even in Germany one wonders what comes next. The only exception seem to be France, for the time being, because of its peculiar institutional arrangements.

In this context it is no surprise that at the European Union level the experiment of the *Spitzenkandidaten* has been forcibly set aside. In a world where very different and authoritarian systems of governance seem to provide much more nimble governance, this is a vital issue which should be tackled: how to combine European values and minimally effective political leadership.

